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The Development of Multiple Skills for the Foreign Language Teacher of the XXIst century – current training needs

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Abstract

If speaking today about the skills in the foreign languages field is an absolutely logical approach and without a need of additional justifications, the matter of their classification from the teaching and/or psychological point of view certainly remains open. The teacher's proficiency profile and the occupational standards which define the teaching career are in the centre of European debates on education topics in the last years, a significant attention being paid to all the challenges that decision makers face all the time: the elaboration of some attractive and incentivising initial training patterns adjusted to the current requirements, awareness of the teacher's role as co-ordinator and active factor of the educational process, identification of the best measures to facilitate the access into the profession, establishment of a set of skills which should properly meet the education quality criteria, increase of the conceptual coherence between the initial and the in-service training and, last but not least, the creation of some fair work conditions (financially and not only). The foreign language teaching profession is currently faced with increasing enrolments and a shortage of qualified teachers. At the same time, a rapidly changing student population, nationwide education reform and the development of national standards for foreign language learning are placing a number of new demands on foreign language teachers. Curtain and Pesola [1] suggest that foreign language teachers today "*require a combination of competencies and background that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers*" and that strong professional development is critical. The present paperwork intends to briefly examine the competency profile of the modern language teacher of the XXIst century in Europe, with emphasis on his general needs of initial and in-service training, which are responsible for the shaping of a creative space for the study of foreign languages and of a "rejuvenated" portrait of the nowadays' linguistic educator.

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1. The European context

The training process, influenced by the new holistic view on the individual, clearly favours the multiplication of its analysis facets: from the cognitive level to the socio-emotional one, from the emotional profile to the technological one, both the pupil's and the teacher's skills expand and contribute more and more intensely to the substantial reorganization of the teaching and learning itinerary. Although the pupil is still occupying a central place, the foreign language teacher's role enhances with additional valences and values, such as those of a mediator, critic, mentor or advisor, to mention only a few of them. The training of such a category of teachers thus become a much more complex and innovative task, in full accordance with the changes and demands of the contemporary society.

Training providers, all decision makers involved in the training of future teaching staff must focus their actions on the fundamental target of creating reflexive and autonomous linguistic educators, capable and willing to act as intercultural communication agents. In this respect, we remind that we already have several key instruments, such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) [2], around which up-to-date and innovative training programs may be conceived: getting accustomed with CEFR, use of ICT (Information and Computer Technology) means, use of other foreign languages spoken by pupils etc. In other words, the training offer addressed to the modern languages teachers must get a modelling added value – understood as a construction of the world perspective according to models, generally, and of the teaching act particularly - both in terms of methodology, as well as the level of promoted values and attitudes. Thus, if the experience of future teachers as students or course attenders will be based on interaction, open communication and tolerance as to others' views, it is very likely that they have a similar approach in the classroom, with their own pupils. In fact, any teacher learns throughout his/her entire life, and the various training courses he/she attends must inspire him/her, motivate him/her and consolidate his/her love for the noble profession chosen.

In fact, even since year 2004 the study entitled *European Profile for Language Teacher Education - a Frame of Reference* [3], conceived by a team of the Southampton University led by professor Michael Kelly and Dr. Michael Grenfell and financed by the European Commission, has been undertaking a comparative analysis of training systems made available to the foreign language teachers in 30 European countries, emphasizing the diversity of situations and content. The Profile continues the conclusions of a previous report which has examined the current stage of the modern language teacher education in more than 32 countries and has found it was necessary to develop a joint terminology base in this field, becoming a reference work by the provision of 40 key elements for the initial and in-service training of these teaching staff, subordinated to the four fundamental dimensions of the document: structure, knowledge and understanding, strategies and skills, values.

If in the first part the authors discuss the various constituent parts (curriculum, internship, accreditation and mobility, mentoring etc.) of the modern languages teachers' training and point the way they should articulate in a coherent and well coagulated structure, the following chapters focus on the outcome of this professionalization route and on how they can be valued effectively in and by the teaching activity. Sections outline, by their interconnection, an overview of the training programs that address to the new generation of European linguistic educators, highlighting the necessity of their substantial restructuring, for the promotion of the spirit of cooperation, interaction and mobility (real and virtual).

There is no doubt that, if we consider the specific skills indicated in the *European Profile* for the education of foreign language teachers, an exclusive theoretical or practical approach can no longer be accepted. The new member states of the EU make considerable efforts, even since year 1990, exactly for the reform of the training route. Thus, in Poland, the first courses for teachers who teach a foreign language in the primary and preschool education were proposed even as of 1995, at the same time with the inauguration of the first institutions specializing in the pedagogical training. In Czech Republic, there is the possibility to study a subject called

„learning a foreign language by children” within the training of primary school teachers. As well, the kindergarten teachers also benefit from an accredited training course. In France, the component regarding the competence in a foreign language is strongly stressed in the recent years in the training of the students who will become primary school teachers.

Sustainable internal training is a measure capable to give satisfactory results. In Poland, between 1999 and 2003, there were launched courses for the teachers in charge with the training of teachers (training of trainers), so that at present we can speak about the existence of a network of trainers highly qualified in the methodology and the theory of modern language early learning (up to the age of 12 years); moreover, the intensity of such training can be enhanced by the integration of teaching elements such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) [4] in the offer for internal training. It is worth mentioning, however, that such an option requires a totally different pedagogical profile, built around a linguistic skill based on the specific contents and methodology. Spain, for instance, suggests intensive courses in the country of origin, accompanied by trips to Great Britain starting from 4 to 10 weeks for the English teachers.

Courses for the improvement of the professional use of language, with a cultural structure and aspects of specific primary and preschool pedagogy, depending on country, are dispensed in France since 1989. One of their specific features is that narrative language, used mainly in the activities in kindergartens and schools, is explained and practised with teachers too. Thus, a literary studies module might be deemed, at first sight, useless for those who teach foreign languages to preschool pupils and young age pupils, but, with the help of this course, teachers could understand better the universe of narratives for children and make an adequate selection of the literary texts.

The adaptation of contents to various learning needs is essential, a process that requires knowledge of psychology and getting accustomed with the mechanisms of foreign language acquisition. In the same Poland, the British Council and Goethe Institute have cooperated for the drafting of an important document for the teachers by appealing to a range of materials resulting from the observation of several classes of Foreign language. A manual and a CD-ROM containing teaching material (10 video extracts of some English and German classes with children from 6 to 8 years) were distributed in Hungary free of charge. CLIL is, at its turn, a Comenius project that intends to provide modules of teaching intercultural topics in the primary education system.

2. Romanian crossroads

The extension and renewal of teaching staff training modalities is an ongoing process of the Romanian education systems. Initial and in-service training initiatives focused on current topics, such as the process of a foreign language acquisition or the intercultural dimension, more and more widespread, equally contribute to increase the academic freedom of institutes and universities that offer such programs. Even if the Ministry of Education continues to draw the guiding lines regarding the contents of learning modules, the institutions in charge with the training of the teaching staff are those which establish the courses schedule, the proportion between the theoretical part and the practical one, the integration degree of the results of recent research or the importance granted to certain related academic subjects, such as linguistics, psychology, pedagogy and civilization.

Such skills, built on personal experiences, cannot be developed in other situations but the authentic ones, that is why we consider essential the inclusion in the curriculum for the training of foreign language teachers of courses focused on the various kinds of teaching practices, but also activities that use work methods that encourage the expression of personal and social skills, such as autonomy or team work. The study programs offered must aim at an integrative content with three dimensions: knowledge of the target language and culture (**cognitive dimension**), behaviour towards the target culture (**affective dimension**) and the communication skill (**pragmatic/action dimension**).

The key dimension of this curricular reform remains the education of the future foreign language teachers, capable to ensure a teaching based on skills, but also genuine *experts in multilingualism*, aware of the inherent plurality of each culture and of the defining synergy for the process of learning a foreign language [5]. Therefore, the new training routes made available for the students should aim at three fundamental aspects:

linguistic skills, located at B2-C1 level of CEFR for the primary and preschool education teachers, C1-C2 for those of the secondary education respectively. Courses subordinated to this target will be conceived according to the principle of direct exploration of reality, laying stress not only on the functional language skills, but also on the development of intercultural skills and on encouraging independent learning throughout the entire life;

pedagogical and methodological skills, with reference both to the rather „traditional” areas (for instance understanding the process of early learning of a foreign language, aspects of teaching planning, pupils’ needs etc.), as well as to the new multilingual and intercultural trends in this field;

meta-teaching skills and reflexive practice, in terms of creating the capacity of critical analysis and selective use, depending on the targets set, of various instruments and methods available to the foreign language teacher. Teachers are thus encouraged to continuously observe and (self)evaluate their own practices, out of the wish to increase the level of efficiency and attractiveness of the educational process. The Finnish professor Viljo Kohonen [6] proposed, in 2001, the following holistic framework for foreign language education, emphasizing the role of reflective experiential learning in the process:

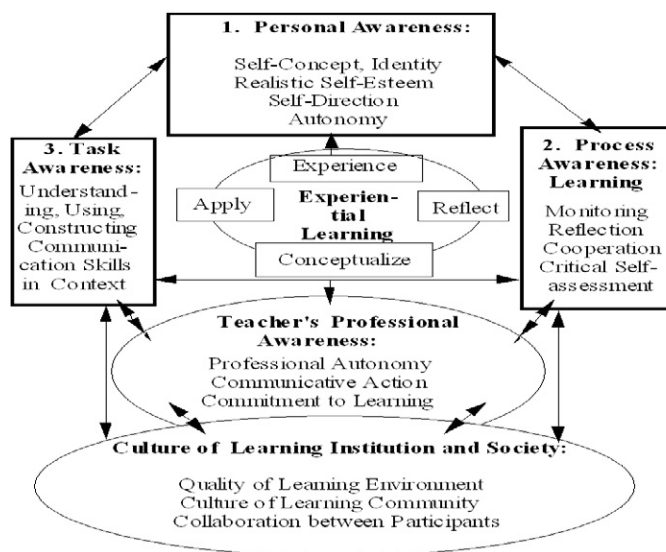


Fig. 1 Foreign language education in the institutional context

All initiatives in this respect must, undoubtedly, meet the expectations of today’s society and specific dynamics of foreign languages field, a subject of which contribution to ensuring the professional success gets an added value in the context of current aspirations to build an open European space, interactive and multilingual. Consequently, training of modern languages teachers also gets a different interpretation than the traditional one, focused on the transmission of knowledge, becoming a much more flexible and complex structure, able to supply the future teachers with those attitudinal and emotional skills without which the process of teaching and learning a foreign language cannot have real chances of success. This assertion is even more valid for the students in age groups characterized by the need of protection, motivation and empathy. The recent features of the linguistic educator must observe the principles worded within the modern theories of language acquisition and to transfer

them in the classroom or group space, so that the foreign language study carry out in an atmosphere meant to encourage the students to communicate freely, deprived of inhibitions, anxieties or constraints.

Unfortunately, the specialty faculties in Romania prefer to include in the curriculum only in the 3rd year of study the concerns for the psycho-pedagogical training, teaching and practice in school. Courses of specialty teaching or those of psychology/ general pedagogy frequently suffer from the excessive “theorizing” disease, thus getting to deny the initial mission, that of developing the key pedagogical skills of the future teachers, to prepare them emotionally and behaviorally for the teaching career and to teach them to reflect on their own teaching act. From this point of view, we deem that a revision of the university curriculum is required, which should keep the balance between the **specialized training**, that trains the teacher for the future activity in school and his/her **pedagogical training**, that completes the first and individualizes the practitioner. We should not forget that the future professional teacher needs to acquire not only a solid scientific training, but also a set of skills impossible to standardize, however useful in atypical educational situations, whose settlement requires creativity, spontaneity, self confidence, openness to new, power to adjust. Such an exercise may be carried out only within the authentic framework of the classroom, where the student will be placed in the position to apply the theoretical principles of foreign languages teaching. The research we have performed recently among the students who are preparing for a teaching career in this field proves the persistence of a state of dissatisfaction with regard to the insufficient number of hours granted to the pedagogical practice, rightly deemed a basic component part of the initial psycho-pedagogical training. Moreover, its mere organization is placed under doubt by students, pointing out the discrepancy between their training needs and the application training units where the practical training classes are carried out (primary schools and kindergartens represent a sporadic presence in the training program for future foreign languages teachers).

Conclusions and proposals

To ensure a coherent and effective professional training program it is necessary to continuously improve the trainers’ vision on the entire students training route, so that to ensure the professionalization of the training process for the teaching career, by using the profession model and the professional standards as a starting point in designing the training activities, as a support in their achievement, as well as a reference system in evaluating the effectiveness of the professional training process.

In this respect, the attention of the policy makers should make for the following action directions:

- *teachers professionalization, a coherent and progressive approach*, according to the linguistic, methodological and psycho-pedagogical requirements that are specific to the age groups considered;
- *creation of a teaching master program* focused on the adequate initial training for the specialists in the field of teaching-learning foreign languages at young ages/ by adults, which should effectively combine the theoretical aspects with the practical approaches of the process – *institutionalization of the initial training route by a nationally agreed model*;
- *diversification and harmonization of the offer of in-service training programs*, as well as ensuring their continuity and coordination with the foreign languages teachers’ initial training;
- *increase of the number of international mobilities – training sessions or study visits – for the foreign languages teachers* that are already at the chair and for the future graduates of the specialty faculties.

In concluding this article, we emphasize, once again, that teachers’ initial and in-service training should always be seen as a national matter of major importance, but effective solely to the extent it comes in line with the international linguistic policies. We refer, in the end, to the reconceptualization of the context of

professionalization of foreign languages teachers in Romania and worldwide, built on the basis of the most recent theories regarding language acquisition and oriented towards the development of a competence profile of the linguistic educators fully adjusted to the needs of the current society.

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